

# The secret to SUCCESS

In the wise words of The Beatles, 'I get by with a little help from my friends'. And office friendships are no exception

By ERIN COE

**YOUR BOSS IS MAKING** you work overtime. Again. The client has decided after months of back and forth that she likes the first idea you presented. And just when you're about to have a nervous breakdown, one of your colleagues arrives with coffee - and a pep talk. She's your work bestie and she always has your back, in all scenarios.

Common sense would say the office is no place to make friends, but what do the experts think? Are work friendships important? The short answer? Yes!

## You're less stressed

Whatever the reason, work-related stress is something we are all familiar with. In fact, a study done by international research company Bloomberg shows that South Africa is the second most stressed nation in the world. Yes, that's right. In the world. With stress comes symptoms such as low energy, headaches, tense muscles and rapid heart beat. According to Daniel Sher, a clinical psychologist in Cape Town:

'Friendships with your colleagues may help reduce work-related stress. A work friend can inject humour into your day, offer distractions when needed, provide external perspective on challenges or just be a sympathetic ear.'

And employers, take note: The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says stress accounts for about 75% of all doctor visits. That's a lot of time your employee isn't in the office, owing to stress.

## It could advance your career

And you thought you had just found a lunch buddy. Career coach Amanda Foster says networking is key to getting ahead: 'It really is not what you know, but who you know.' Career coach Penny Holburn agrees. 'Having friends, even in other departments, can help you stay abreast of what's happening in the company. Friends can often be a source of info about new job openings or projects, and any changes coming down the line.' On a broader level, having friends at the office can also look good

in your boss's eyes, as it shows you're a team player. Penny elaborates: 'When leaders are looking to promote employees, it is essential that a prospective manager be good at dealing with people. Your ability to socialise with colleagues and others in the workplace will show you in a good light.'

## You're more productive

When office friends collaborate, they produce better and more effective work than when those

who have a solely professional relationship collaborate. A study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* proved this to be true when they divided 159 people into groups of three and got them to perform two tasks, one involving collaborative decision-making and the other manual labour. The groups consisted of either three acquaintances or friends. The results? The friend groups outperformed acquaintances in both cases. So, why is that?

According to Daniel, 'Working with friends can really improve performance, as you're more likely to communicate better, give honest feedback, ask for help, and offer encouragement.' And what about if you're not specifically working together on a project? You should still be more productive, Amanda says. 'Having friends makes

us happy and happiness can result in productivity. When you're happy, your body is more at ease, which means muscles aren't tense and blood and oxygen is flowing more freely. This allows the body and brain to function more effectively.

When you are happy, you're also more present - not swept

up in worry or daily stresses, so you're able to focus on the task at hand.'

## You're more likely to push the envelope

Having friends at work makes it easier for you to put ideas forward. 'Quite simply, having friends helps you feel liked, competent and self-assured,'

says Daniel, 'so you're more likely to speak up when you have an idea. Some people may have creative ideas to improve systems, but because they don't feel confident enough, they don't speak up. If you have a support network to back you up, you may find it easier to take the risks necessary.'

**Playing with fire:** If there's one person you shouldn't have a close friendship with at the office, it's your boss. 'Your other colleagues will become wary of you and wonder if you are getting favours,' Penny explains. 'So be good friends with colleagues and people in other departments. By all means, be friendly to seniors in your department - just not too friendly.'

careers



## THE DOWNSIDE?

As with any friendship, whether personal or work related, things can go bad. We're only human after all... Here's how to keep it real:

'In an office environment, it's easy for money, promotion or power get in the way,' career coach Amanda Foster explains. 'If your friendship is real, those things shouldn't matter. Take a look at your relationship and ask yourself what kind of a friendship you have. Are one or both of you using the other to get ahead in business? If so, then your relationship will be rather fragile when money, promotion or power come into the mix.'